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Anachronism or Illumination? Genesis 1 and Creation *ex nihilo*

SUSANNAH TICCIAI*

The aim of this article is to explore the relation between scriptural interpretation, ambiguity, and truth, with a view to testing the following hypothesis: "Christian doctrine has the role of preserving scripture's generativity by holding open its ambiguity." The hypothesis is tested by way of a case study focused on the opening of Genesis and the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. The article challenges the assumption that the use of the latter as a hermeneutical rule for the former is anachronistic, arguing that such an assumption involves a category mistake, and offering (by contrast) a semiotic account of interpretation according to which a text's truth unfolds over time. The article responds to a more specific theological and hermeneutical critique of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo by showing how it generatively holds open the ambiguity of Genesis 1:1–4, making way for life-giving readings of scripture that heal contextually specific sin.

¹ In the beginning [*bereshit*], God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void [*tohu vabohu*], and darkness was over the face of the deep [*tehom*]. And the Spirit of God [*ruach elohim*] was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. (*Gen. 1:1–4, ESV*)

The opening of Genesis is full of ambiguities. Many of these arise from its puzzling second verse. Does the *tohu vabohu* of verse 2 pre-exist God's act of creation in verse 1, or is it, too, created by God? Does it indicate chaos in opposition to the order of verses 3 and 4, or

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potential for that order? Is the darkness of verse 2 to be identified with or distinguished from the darkness of verse 3? Does the omission of a pronouncement of God that the darkness was good imply that only the light was good? Is the *ruach elohim* the Spirit of God or an almighty wind? Are the waters a threat to creation or a locus for the generation of life? Moreover, there is a grammatical ambiguity introduced by the unusual form *bereshit*, which can be taken to turn the first verse into a subordinate clause, leading to a translation along the following lines: "At the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth when the earth was without form and void . . . God said 'Let there be . . .'"¹

Gathering these questions together, we might ask the following: Is the state depicted in verse 2 rejected by God, posited by God, or merely formed by God? And further, is it good or evil?

In this article, my aim is to explore the relation between interpretation, ambiguity, and truth by way of a case study focused on the opening of Genesis and its relationship with the doctrine of creation out of nothing (or creation *ex nihilo*). I will set out from some broad hermeneutical presuppositions, to be outlined below. These will issue in a more specific hypothesis, to be tested by way of the case study, which will in turn enable the broader hermeneutical framework to be fleshed out theologically. I test the following hypothesis: Christian doctrine has the role of preserving scripture's generativity by holding open its ambiguity. The case study will test the hypothesis with respect to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and its use as a hermeneutical rule for the opening of Genesis.

The article is structured as follows. Having established the broad hermeneutical framework in the first section, I focus in the second on creation *ex nihilo* and Genesis 1, responding to the preliminary charge of anachronism. In a third section I expound an alternative theological reading of Genesis 1 by Catherine Keller, in which the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* comes under substantive attack. In a fourth section I offer a conceptual-theological response, reconceiving and rehabilitating the logic of the doctrine. And in a final section I offer an exegetical-hermeneutical response, arguing against both Keller

¹ This is the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi's translation. *Pentateuch with Tarhum, Onkelos, Haptaroth and Rashi's Commentary: Genesis*, trans. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1965), 2. Modern commentators tend to adopt something nearer Rashi's translation in preference to the traditional ESV cited above.

and her nemesis, Karl Barth, for the appropriateness of the doctrine as a hermeneutical rule, in the light of its ability to hold open the generative ambiguities of Genesis 1.

Hermeneutical Framework

The ambiguities of the opening of Genesis, I suggest, are not coincidental to its status as Holy Scripture. More specifically, I hazard, they are intrinsic to its ability to sustain flourishing communities over broad stretches of space and time: I link scripture's ambiguity to its generativity or life-giving power, surmising that the character and scope of scripture's truth has to do precisely with its power to give life.

My proposal has two foils. The first is a hermeneutic that reduces a text's capacity for truth telling to its origins, binding its meaning to a putative authorial intention, or to the way it would have been understood in its "original" context. On my account, by contrast, a text is situated within a wider web of signs in interrelation with which the text's own signs gain their signification. This wider web is variously expanded, contracted, and transmuted over time, bringing the text's signs into new relations that transform their significance by generating new patterns of relation or habits of interpretation. This ability to enter into new relations is tantamount to the textual signs' ability to transcend their "original" context of signification. To reduce the text to its origins is to freeze the semiotic web.

The second foil is a hermeneutic that recognizes different "contexts of signification" or "frames of reference," ranging them alongside one another as generative of various meanings or habits of interpretation. The problem here is that the connections between disparate frames of reference are lost to view, and are so because the one who does the ranging has been elided. She becomes a mere voyeur of incommensurable interpretations, not inhabiting any of them and unable to adjudicate between them. But this belies her ability, displayed in the way she ranges them alongside one another, to compare and contrast them, and thus to bring them under the auspices of certain common questions. In doing so, she reveals a wider semiotic web in which they (and she) are virtually situated, actualizing that web in her act of comparative interpretation. Without recognition of this wider web, the text's potential truth, while no longer reduced to origins, instead fragments into multiple, incommensurable truths, reflecting multiple, incommensurable realities. A reduction to origins is replaced by a reductionist relativism.

To recognize a wider semiotic web, by contrast, is to entertain a potentially unified reality in which otherwise disparate contexts of signification inhere and to which the significations generated within them contribute. "Truth," on this hypothesis, is consonance with and coherence in that unified reality. A text signifies truly, or contributes to the truth, insofar as it displays and fosters that reality by generating habits of interpretation that are consonant with and cohere in it. Untruthful habits will in the long run be shown up to be illusory or fictional in respect of this reality, ultimately unable to sustain themselves as they are resisted and replaced by habits that are confirmed rather than contradicted over time.² Note here that truth is both discovered and made by the activity of signification or semiosis. While not framing it semiotically, Jeffrey Stout makes an analogous hermeneutical point when he says,

Interpretation need not cease to be discovery because it requires this much creation in the service of interest and purpose. An interpretation involving no creativity . . . could consist in nothing more than repetition of the text itself. Readings are either creative or superfluous.³

I will capture the semiotic conjunction of "revealing something about" and "contributing something to" by the circumlocution "signifying into."

I suggest defining the generativity of a text as its ability to generate multiple semiotic connections, and to continue to do so over time, enriching and expanding an evolving semiotic web. On this definition, some texts will be true (that is, have a tendency to generate truthful habits of interpretation) but not especially generative, since they were written for a specific, context-bound purpose (for example, a note to let one's child know where she can find the house keys). The more delimited a text, the less its capacity to transcend its "original purpose"

² Compare the definitions of truth and reality given by C. S. Peirce: "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real" ("How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, ed., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 1 [1867–1893]*, [Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992], 124–141, at 139).

³ Jeffrey Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?," *New Literary History* 14, no. 1 (1982): 1–12, at 8.

and generate new semiotic connections in changing contexts. Richer, complex, more open texts will, by contrast, have a greater potential for doing so, and thus a greater scope for the generation of truthful habits, signifying cumulatively into the one unfolding reality in manifold ways. Generativity is no guarantee of truth, but if a text tends toward the generation of untruthful habits of interpretation, which in the long run are unsustainable, its generativity will also die out. Thus, the longer a text proves to be generative, the more it confirms its tendency to generate truthful habits of interpretation, contributing to the one, unfolding reality.

Ambiguity, I suggest, is an important ingredient in a text's richness or potential for generativity. Ambiguity involves both multivalence and undecidability or openness. The more multivalent the signs of a text, and the looser the connections between them (making them open to more than one determination), the greater their scope to signify beyond a delimited context. Stout frames this potential in terms of "interest":

The more interesting the text, the more readings we shall be able to give without simply repeating ourselves and our predecessors, and the more readings we shall want to give. Classics will be the limiting cases. We say that such texts possess inexhaustible meaning. I would rather say that they never manage to exhaust our interest.⁴

Stout acknowledges something analogous to what I have been calling a text's generativity, but I would argue for two related reasons that his appeal to interest needs complementing by reference to truth. First, his account is otherwise liable to devolve into the second hermeneutical foil outline above, with multiple interests corresponding to multiple frames of reference. Stout may have no problem with that. However, without reference to a common world shared by the text's producers and its remote readers, it is impossible to account for the text's interest for those readers as more than a coincidental possibility.⁵ The existence of "classics" thus lends credence to the hypothesis

⁴ Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?," 8.

⁵ Which is arguably all that an approach like that of Stanley Fish allows, as famously articulated in Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

that there is a unified reality to which everything tends. Second, without reference to a common world and therefore a common good, interest can easily slide into self-interest, being limited to the purposes and concerns of a particular community of readers. As we have seen, Stout pairs creativity with discovery. In order to justify the discovery pole, I suggest, he needs the hypothesis of a common world.

This hypothesis finds theological articulation in a Christian doctrine of creation, which attests a creator from which the world comes and in which it coheres, as the one creation of the one creator. A doctrine of creation also sharpens the connection between generativity and truth insofar as it points to a creator who gives life. A text can be said to be generative in the stronger sense of life-giving if it signifies into the reality to which God gives life, a reality God also calls good. Evil, as privation of the good, can be said to be that which deprives of life, reversing the generativity of the creator. As such it will ultimately be self-defeating, tending toward death. Such a theological vision confirms the unsustainability, or nongenerativity, of untruthful interpretations.

Creation ex nihilo: The Challenge of Anachronism

The more specific doctrine of creation implicitly at play in the above theological portrait is the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*: God creates out of nothing, and evil tends toward nothing. It is this doctrine that will provide the testing ground for the more general hypothesis that Christian doctrine (when doing its job properly) serves to sustain the generativity of scripture by holding open its ambiguity. If scripture's life-giving capacity has to do with its ability to yield new, life-giving interpretations in changing contexts, then interpretations that hinder its ability to do so by overdetermining its meaning for a particular community, or by reducing its meaning to its meaning "for us, now," need to be guarded against. My suggestion is that doctrine plays (or should play) this role, offering not a particular, context-bound interpretation, but a hermeneutical rule that positively serves the text's generativity and negatively rules out nongenerative interpretations. I will test this hypothesis in respect of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as a hermeneutical rule for the interpretation of Genesis 1.

Before doing so, however, an immediate hermeneutical challenge must be confronted. Surely it is simply anachronistic to apply the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to Genesis 1. This challenge is felt

specifically in the context of the kind of account represented by the first hermeneutical foil outlined above. A response to it will thus flesh out our negotiation and critique of the latter.

Historical-critical scholarship on Genesis 1, in its relocation of the chapter in its putative ancient contexts of production, has made untenable an appeal to creation *ex nihilo* as an appropriate interpretive gloss on its opening verses. The consensus has shifted away from a traditional *ex nihilo* interpretation toward an interpretation according to which God works with what is already there (as described in verse 2). This shift is connected with a shift away from the translation that has verse 1 as an independent clause to one in which it is a subordinate clause leading into verse 2 (or with verse 2 into verse 3). Jon Levenson's interpretation gives clear and authoritative articulation to these shifts, the age of his work indicating that the consensus has been well-established for some time.⁶

On the one hand, Levenson contrasts Genesis 1 with the *Chaos-kampf* tradition embodied by the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, in which Marduk gains his sovereignty through the defeat of the older goddess, Tiamat, or the waters of chaos, whose body he splits in half in creation of the present world.⁷ In Genesis 1, by contrast, there is no battle and defeat, but "creation without opposition," in which God "works on inert matter" (as depicted in verse 2).⁸ On the other hand, Levenson contrasts Genesis 1 with "the developed Jewish, Christian and Muslim doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*."⁹ The latter depends, he suggests, on the now discredited translation, "In the beginning God created . . .," understood "to refer to some comprehensive creative act on the first day."¹⁰ But this understanding is undermined, he continues, by the reports a few verses later of the heaven being created on the second day and the earth on the third.¹¹ God does not create out of nothing, but divides and separates.¹² Effortless though it may be, God's creating is still about the imposition of order, in the

⁶ Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁷ Levenson, *Creation*, 4.

⁸ Levenson, *Creation*, 122.

⁹ Levenson, *Creation*, 121.

¹⁰ Levenson, *Creation*, 5.

¹¹ Levenson, *Creation*, 5 and 121.

¹² Levenson, *Creation*, 121–122.

control and limitation of “the forces of chaos”: “even when [they] pose no threat to the creator, they still persist, and their persistence qualifies—and defines—his world mastery.”¹³ Thus in Genesis 1, while the watery chaos of the *Chaoskampf* has been “neutralized [and] demythologized,” it has not been “eliminated.”¹⁴ Levenson concludes by highlighting the cultic character of Genesis 1:1–2:3, with its implication that it is through the cult that human beings can participate in God’s maintenance of order, keeping chaos—which Levenson now unequivocally names evil—at bay.¹⁵

If biblical scholarship undermines the association between Genesis 1 and creation *ex nihilo* from one side, then patristic scholarship does so from the other, dating the emergence and establishment of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as Christian orthodoxy to the end of the second century.¹⁶ The doctrine was forged in the course of doctrinal controversy, with its aim of establishing the boundaries between orthodoxy and heresy, and in negotiation of Greek philosophical models. Two key targets were Platonic “world-formation,” with its assumption of the eternity of matter (which Justin Martyr had embraced as at one with the Genesis account), and gnostic emanationism. Ruling these options out, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was intended to enshrine the unparalleled sovereignty of God (which the eternity of matter might compromise), and to introduce an absolute ontological distinction between God and creation (a distinction clearly blurred by the principle of emanation). Argued for by Theophilus and Tertullian, it became a settled teaching with Irenaeus.

The relative youth of the doctrine, paired with its absence from—indeed contradiction by—the Genesis account, issues inevitably in the charge of anachronism with respect to any attempt to read Genesis in terms of creation *ex nihilo*. How might one respond to this charge?

The judgment of anachronism is made with respect to *historical* claims, for example about a text’s context of original production. It would indeed be anachronistic to say that Genesis 1, in its ancient

¹³ Levenson, *Creation*, 65.

¹⁴ Levenson, *Creation*, 122.

¹⁵ Levenson, *Creation*, 127.

¹⁶ See Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation Out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh, U.K.: T&T Clark, 1994) for an authoritative account. David Fergusson offers a helpful overview in “Creation,” in Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72–90.

contexts of production, taught the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The purview of my hermeneutical account is much broader than this limited historical one, however. It is concerned with the truth of Genesis 1, which, as I have suggested, has to do with its life-giving generativity, or in other words, its ongoing signification into God's unfolding creation. A limited perspective on that truth might be gained by hypothetical reconstructions of the significance of Genesis in its ancient contexts of production—but only a limited perspective. Truth is something that unfolds over time, transcending those original contexts as the text is drawn into new semiotic connections, signifying in new ways into an unfolding reality.

The fact that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was only crystallized and formulated a long time after the writing of Genesis 1 is not, therefore, an argument against its truthfulness as an interpretive perspective on Genesis 1. (It might even speak for it, on the grounds that the discovery of truth takes time.) More specifically, the judgment of anachronism is simply inapplicable to the claim that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is an appropriate hermeneutical rule for the interpretation of Genesis 1. Alternative criteria for appropriateness will be needed. If it is truth we care about, then I have suggested that the criterion be the doctrine's ability to preserve the generativity of scripture.

Creation Out of Chaos?

Having dispelled the charge of anachronism, I have made way for a substantive engagement with creation *ex nihilo* in its application to Genesis 1. A compelling case against it is made by Catherine Keller in *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*.¹⁷ Keller makes for an especially appropriate and fruitful dialogue partner because she operates with a hermeneutic strongly resonant with my hermeneutic of generativity. Interpretation, for her, is all about the negotiation of gaps in the text, gaps that register a multiplicity of textual allusions and the traces left by history. Good interpretations will read the gaps without finally plugging them, honoring and savoring the text's "irreducible ambiguities."¹⁸ She rejects a privileging of "the truth of the

¹⁷ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 16, compare with 118.

original,”¹⁹ embracing a hermeneutical pluralism that engages with “the history of [a text’s] effects”²⁰:

God, it seems, has left interpretive gaps in the universe itself, and therefore also in the Torah. The world and the text await interpretation. Thus the text cannot mirror an original, transparent . . . meaning. It will make meaning through cooperative interaction in history. . . . That meaning lives only in the relationships constituting the present signifying process.²¹

While she does not gesture, as I have done, toward a unified reality in respect of which one can speak of “the truth,” her hermeneutical pluralism does not fracture into an incommensurability of meanings, since nothing escapes relationship, and nothing arises *de novo* (or *ex nihilo*).

Despite this strong hermeneutical affinity, Keller reaches the opposite conclusion from the one I will argue for with respect to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, declaring that it “brooks no ambiguity.”²² The doctrine provides the negative foil for her own interpretation of Genesis 1:1–3. Specifically, she argues that it has served to suppress verse 2 by bringing its fluid chaos under the control of a (male) God who imposes order by positing an absolute origin. It cuts off and delimits the murky depths of creation (*tehom*) by interposing a rock bottom beyond which they cannot flow, allowing for no spillage. With this doctrine, Christian theology “systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation.” But the chaos always seeps back in, needing “to be nihilated all the more violently.” In “a vicious circle,” the erasure must be repeated again and again.²³ Keller does not have mere hermeneutical erasure in mind, moreover. The *ex nihilo* logic manifests itself concretely in the erasure of all kinds of “disorderly” others, whether those others are constructed patriarchally, racially, colonially, or anthropocentrically, and so on.

Keller is careful not to repeat this violent nihilation in her own negative judgment on creation *ex nihilo*. First, she is a generous reader

¹⁹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 118.

²⁰ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 109.

²¹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 119.

²² Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 18.

²³ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvi.

of the tradition in which it was incubated, exploiting its multivalence and retrieving its concealed goods. For example, she notes that Irenaeus's argument for creation *ex nihilo* serves the recognition of God's pervasive immanence to creation, conceding nevertheless that the result is an "intimacy of domination."²⁴ Keller finds multivalence paradigmatically in Augustine's *Confessions*, however. Augustine, as she reads him, fully acknowledges the ambiguity of Genesis 1, but plugs its gaps by appeal to creation *ex nihilo*. He recognizes the feminine fluidity of the unformed spiritual matter (the waters of verse 2), but freezes them in their in/formation by the masculine deity. Again, he attends to his own inner depths in the narrative of *Confessions*, crying out to God from the deep, but at the same time names those depths original sin.²⁵

Second, while she says no to an *ex nihilo* logic, the alternative "tehomitic" logic she develops does not, as its equal and opposite, unequivocally embrace a romanticized chaos. Instead, Keller's tehomitic theology destabilizes the order/disorder binary by defining chaos "not simply as a disorder but as a state of primal indeterminacy,"²⁶ and not as "void of relations [but as] the place of all relations, all virtualities. . . . The chaos—not the good, not the evil—but the potential for good or ill."²⁷ Likewise, Keller does not reject an absolute and totalizing divine origin in favor of secular, historical beginnings. Instead, she invokes the *tehom* as place "of beginning,"²⁸ which, because it is always already there, is the matrix of possibility from which both creator and creature emerge.²⁹ Such emergence involves decision: the actualization of some possibilities over against others, at which point the law of noncontradiction comes into play. It is (for Keller) in this world of binary logic that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has its place, but by the same token it cannot contemplate the prior indeterminacy, which transcends the law of noncontradiction.³⁰

To house this *tehom*, Keller reaches for a theology of becoming, a "panentheism" in which the divine and the cosmic subsist in an

²⁴ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 51, compare with 90.

²⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 65–83.

²⁶ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 146.

²⁷ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 169, 81.

²⁸ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 161.

²⁹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 163.

³⁰ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 13.

“active indeterminacy” of relationship.³¹ And ultimately she gestures toward a trinity of *Tehom* (depth), *Elohim* (difference), and *Ruach* (relationality).³² But she ends by suggesting that this be taken with a pinch of salt, since it is another potential device for closure.³³

A Conceptual-Theological Response

Keller enticingly portrays a nonothering, nonclosed vision of creation, which makes way for proper acknowledgment of creaturely difference and diversity, rooted in a prior dynamism of indeterminacy and potentiality. She identifies the logic of creation *ex nihilo* as the supersessionist, exclusionary, and oppressive logic of closure that needs to be refused. It will not be hard to offer a *conceptual* response to Keller that resituates creation *ex nihilo* on the side of openness rather than closure, rehabilitating it in a way that is fundamentally in keeping with her *tehom*ic vision. This is something that nevertheless needs to be done in order to pave the way to the more difficult job of responding *hermeneutically and exegetically* to Keller’s reading of Genesis 1:2 in such a way as to find in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* a hermeneutical key for the preservation of the ambiguities of the deep instead of their premature cutting off. She has read it as plugging the gaps; I will seek to reread it as holding them open.

But first, a conceptual response is in order. In the first place, Keller makes a basic logical error in her articulation of creation *ex nihilo*. She speaks, for example, about a “*pure dualism of originating Logos and prevenient Nothing*.”³⁴ This surreptitiously takes the nothing to be a kind of something, set over against the Logos. You cannot have a dualism between the Logos and (genuine) nothing, by contrast, since a dualism can only arise between two somethings. Again, she asserts that “creation from nothing requires a space . . . where God most definitely is *not*.”³⁵ But only nothing as a kind of something could be such a space. Such claims confirm our suspicions that when, at the opening of her first chapter, she asks, “Are we not created from this nothing—this bottomless shadow?,”³⁶ this is no mere rhetorical

³¹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 219.

³² Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 231–235.

³³ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 238.

³⁴ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 10.

³⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 18.

³⁶ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 3.

flourish, but a logical slip that will underwrite her whole treatment of the creation out of nothing. Her concern, we discover, is about an interpretation of Genesis 1 that suppresses verse 2, treating the chaos as nothing. "Would this string of icons together signify nothing but—*nothing*?" While she acknowledges the alternative traditional interpretation that the chaos has itself been created from a prior nothing, her real concern is that something be treated as nothing; and however much regress there is before the nothing is asserted, it will always (she fears) erase an even earlier something. It is just this that allows the shift from talk of *nihil* to talk of *nihilation*.³⁷

Rightly understood, however, the doctrine of creation out of nothing is precisely intended to deny that creation is *out of* anything, that is, that there is anything prior to creation that is either excluded by it, superseded by it, or imposed upon by it. There is nothing there to be excluded, superseded, or imposed upon.³⁸ Creation *ex nihilo*, in other words, removes the necessary conditions for violent nihilation—or anything akin to it. Creation cannot be an act of male control, since there is nothing there for the creator to control. By the same token, it cannot be the exclusion of female fluidity, since the invocation of the latter presupposes the same binary in terms of which the (male) creator subjugates the (female) would-be nothing. Once the binary is removed by a genuine *ex nihilo*, the creator is no longer harnessed to a male image, being freed by a genuine transcendence both *from* an insidious gender binary and *for* multigendered representations. In short, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* rules out any kind of struggle between creator and a semi-independent creation, and therefore the conditions for any relation of hierarchy, domination, and oppression between creator and creation. Rather, because nothing is presupposed by creation, God is the only presupposition and context for creation, from which it follows that creation is not external to God as something God must bring into shape from without, but subsists entirely within God's creative agency. In this way, God's utter transcendence is complemented by God's utter immanence.³⁹

³⁷ For example, Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvi.

³⁸ See Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2000), 63–78, for an illuminating account. For a more purely logical account, see Herbert McCabe, "Creation," in *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 2005; first published in 1987), 2–9.

³⁹ This logic is clearly and persuasively articulated by Kathryn Tanner in *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell

Positively, because nothing is presupposed to creation, creation is not bound by any extrinsic pattern or rule, and so is free to be entirely itself, not answerable to an external standard. Thus, its indeterminacies are to be acknowledged as the indeterminacies they are, rather than being prematurely and fearfully excluded by safe determinacies. And finite actualities, once determined, are likewise to be acknowledged as such. The creator, as transcendent of all creaturely difference, can be equally the creator of chaos as of order, indeterminacy as of determinacy. True transcendence does not foreclose the possibilities of creation, but is their liberating context.

An Exegetical-Hermeneutical Response

So much for a conceptual response to Keller's challenge. But what about a hermeneutical and exegetical one? In other words, does creation *ex nihilo* hold open not only the possibilities of creation but also the possibilities or ambiguities of the text of Genesis 1? Keller, as we have seen, has claimed that the doctrine "brooks no ambiguity"⁴⁰; she is right insofar as it unambiguously determines the chaos of verse 2 as a creature of God, rather than as primordial with God. But Keller, too, has closed this textual gap—merely in the other direction (in favor of the chaos as primordial with God). To interpret, it seems, one must determine. The gapped text is simply the text. The question, then, is what possibilities are held open—or opened up—by one closure. Let us return to the gaps identified at the beginning of this article, and ask how they fare in the light of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

A brief comment is in order, first, on what I have called the grammatical ambiguity. Does creation *ex nihilo* only fit with a traditional translation that has been called in question? This *would* be the case if creation *ex nihilo* were being presented as the content of those verses rather than as a formal hermeneutical rule. Translations that subordinate verse 1 to verse 2 (or verses 1 and 2 to verse 3), more clearly than the traditional translation, leave open the possibility that the subject matter of verse 2 was not itself created by God, contra creation *ex nihilo*. However, before any other gaps are filled in, alternative translations do no more than leave open that possibility. Creation *ex nihilo* as a hermeneutical rule instructs one to foreclose the possibility that

Publishing, 1988). Keller acknowledges but does not directly engage with similar arguments put forward by Tanner elsewhere (Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 254 n48).

⁴⁰ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 18.

the chaos is primordial with God. Our job, as we have said, is to find out what happens to the other gaps in the wake of this foreclosure.

The other gaps, so it appears, all implicitly hinge on the problem of evil. Is the chaos vibrant potentiality, or an affront to order to be rejected? Is the darkness benign or ominous? Are the waters threatening or life giving? Is the *ruach* a godless wind or a holy creativity? Is the darkness of verse 4 a good creature of God or the menacing shadow of the light created? Keller retains a fundamental ambiguity here: she reads the *tehom* “not as the evil, but as the active potentiality for both good and evil.”⁴¹ Indeed, her rejection of creation *ex nihilo* is for the sake of *tehom as ambiguity*. In this way, Keller’s hermeneutic of ambiguity becomes itself the subject matter of the text. Or conversely, in Keller’s words, “the exegetical incongruities of the creation push beyond the hermeneutics of *tehom* [*tehom* as subject matter] to a *tehom*ic hermeneutic [*tehom* as hermeneutic].”⁴²

Keller’s interpretation is developed in negative counterpoint to that of Karl Barth, who takes the *ex nihilo* tradition, as she reads it, to its extreme: “the Barthian deep is not nothing, but worse than nothing . . . if the early fathers repress the dark waters, if Augustine more indulgently sublimates them, Barth’s opus performs their demonization.”⁴³ In respect of the problem of evil, Barth grasps the nettle, interpreting the state depicted in verse 2 as nothing other than the state “of evil, of sin, of the fall and all its consequences.”⁴⁴ There is no ambiguity here. *Tohu vabohu*, he pronounces, can be given “no positive qualification.”⁴⁵ *Tehom* is an expression “for the abyss of that which is intrinsically impossible.”⁴⁶ A “caricature” of God’s good creation,⁴⁷ verse 2 is an anomaly in Genesis 1. Barth concludes that it indicates simply that which is rejected by God, a rejection concomitant with God’s election of the ordered creation, the implicit No uttered with and under God’s Yes. Verse 2 thus depicts “the past” of creation, or that which is “superseded” by it.⁴⁸ This “creation as exclusion” is

⁴¹ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 91.

⁴² Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 117.

⁴³ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 84.

⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 107.

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD* III/1, 104.

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD* III/1, 104.

⁴⁷ Barth, *CD* III/1, 103.

⁴⁸ Barth, *CD* III/1, 107.

precisely the target of Keller's critique. Here, arguably, *nihil* as *das Nichtige* (nothingness)⁴⁹ becomes nihilation (and simultaneously that which is nihilated).

While Barth formally affirms the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*,⁵⁰ he sails close to the wind in the highly questionable construal he gives it in his interpretation of Genesis 1, in which, as we have seen, God's creation "out of nothing" is also a supersession and exclusion. This is arguably no longer creation *ex nihilo*. Barth's interpretation thus provides a good foil against which to develop my own interpretation, in which creation *ex nihilo* is construed rather differently—in such a way, moreover, as to respond to Keller's critique. Thus I will explore further aspects of Barth's interpretation in order, by contrast, to delineate my own.

Barth observes that on the first two days of creation, and on the first part of the third, "to create is to separate."⁵¹ He interprets this separation in terms of the pattern of divine election and rejection captured in the contrast between verses 1 and 2, which prefigures and corresponds to God's rejection and election of creation in Jesus Christ—who stands at the center of the covenant between God and creation that is the goal of creation. While he devotes much exegetical space to each of the days of creation in its own right, the separations of the first three days set the scene for the following days, which concern "the furnishing of the cosmos" that has been marked out by separations.⁵² Theologically, and to a large extent exegetically, Barth's tendency is to subsume creation into God's act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

By contrast, a reading according to the logic of creation *ex nihilo* as set out (contra Keller) above, is able (potentially) not only to affirm the indeterminacy of verse 2, but also the determinate creatures of the following verses, such that the separations need not be understood as antagonistic pairs, but as particular distinctions between good creatures. Different kinds of distinction can also be recognized. Thus, the apparently absolute opposition between light and darkness can, in keeping with the mention of evening and morning in verse 5b, be understood to posit two extremes of a spectrum in which

⁴⁹ Barth's category for evil, developed in *CD* III/3, §50.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Barth, *CD* III/1, 15.

⁵¹ Barth, *CD* III/1, 121.

⁵² Barth, *CD* III/1, 155.

gradations of light and darkness can be recognized. Furthermore, the distinction between land and sea in verse 9 need not be construed as an opposition at all, but as a differentiation between two kinds of living environment (to be distinguished from yet another one—the sky—depicted in verses 6–8). All the more so do all the varieties of living creatures indicated in verses 11–27 break free from a binary, oppositional logic—multiplying distinctions of many kinds. Finally, the distinctions of verses 3–27 need not be construed as in opposition to the indeterminacy of verse 2, as order to disorder, but rather to stand positively to it in a relation of actuality to potency.

Returning to the difficult verse 2, Barth's interpretation is significantly informed by other scriptural occurrences of the key terms. His findings in respect of the other combined uses of *tohu* and *bohu* present a special challenge to a positive reading of the indeterminacy of verse 2 as God's creature, and thus to the alternative *ex nihilo* reading I am developing. "I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void [*vehinneh tohu vabohu*]; and to the heavens, and they had no light" (Jer. 4:23). "He shall stretch the line of confusion [*tohu*] over it, and the plumb line of emptiness [*bohu*]" (Isa. 34:11). From its resonance with these prophetic visions, Barth concludes that the 'the condition of the earth depicted in [Gen. 1:2] is identical with the whole horror of the final judgment.'⁵³ His alignment of creation with salvation gains real traction in this connection.

But Barth conceals an important asymmetry between these verses that arises on his interpretation. In Isaiah explicitly, but implicitly in Jeremiah (see Jer. 4:26–27), it is God who brings about the state of *tohu vabohu*. The horrors are the consequence of God's judgment, in Barth's terms. The *tohu vabohu* of Genesis 1:2, by contrast, is not brought about by God, but is rather the passive object of God's rejection. Barth's neat alignment is not so neat. Might this invite an alternative interpretation? In Barthian manner, might we not say that God's unified disposition toward creation can be received by God's creatures either as love or as wrath? In other words, might *tohu vabohu*, as an effect of God's creative love in Genesis 1, be experienced in Jeremiah 4 and Isaiah 34, under the conditions of sin, as wrath? In both cases *tohu vabohu* is the work of God, but it manifests itself differently under different conditions. The anomalous nature of Genesis 1:2 is then explained by the fact that (on a Christian traditional interpretation)

⁵³ Barth, *CD* III/1, 103.

it is situated in one of the only scriptural passages that witnesses to a context predating the fall.

I will tease out this possibility in implicit reinterpretation of Keller. One might argue that in a postfallen world chaos can only be greeted as horror. Operating with Keller's (violent) *ex nihilo* logic, we seek to exclude those others that we cannot assimilate to our own systems of signification, naming them "chaos" in opposition to our "order." All the while we repress our own chaos, projecting it onto those demonized others. Moreover, our suppression of (good) chaos itself generates the (evil) chaos we fear, both in ourselves and (potentially) in others. In ourselves: the suppression of our own otherness to the order we impose erupts in the destruction of others onto whom we project our uncontainable otherness. This imposition of order barely conceals the chaotic disorder of sin. In others: the suppression of different others may force those others into a position in which they can only manifest their chaotic otherness destructively, as they seek to break out of the confines of the order imposed upon them. Constructed as the binary opposite of order, their (potentially benign) chaos becomes *disorder*.

In this fallen context, God's (re)creation *ex nihilo* can only be experienced by the sinner as a horror, because it indicates a God who transcends all creaturely order, and other creatures who transcend my particular contexts of order. This would explain the devastating visions of Jeremiah 4 and Isaiah 34, interpreted as God's reestablishment of the conditions of creation *ex nihilo* by the re-creation of a *tohu vabohu* destructive of idolatrous creaturely orders. Genesis 1 witnesses to an alternative scenario in which, rather than being destructively pitted against idolatrous order, *tohu vabohu* as a good indeterminacy houses more than one possibility of contextual order. This "vague"⁵⁴ logic allows the other to abide by her own contextual order, unassimilable to mine, transcending my contextual order without threatening it.

This reading, through the lens of a rehabilitated doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, holds open one of the fundamental ambiguities of Genesis 1:2. Is the chaos good or evil? It depends on how it is greeted. In a fallen context, chaos (benign in itself) is experienced as threat, leading

⁵⁴ The reference is to C. S. Peirce, who developed a logic of vagueness (or triadic logic) to be distinguished from a standard two-value logic. See, for example, "Issues of Pragmaticism," in the Peirce Edition Project, ed., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Volume 2 (1893–1913)* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998), 346–359.

to its suppression. At this point, it is not *tohu vabohu* that is evil but its suppression. However, its suppression creates the evil chaos that is feared—in the form of the destructive disorder of sin. Only in the confession of sin, in response to the judgment of God's recreation *ex nihilo*, I suggest, can chaos be rediscovered as nonthreatening gift, or as the good indeterminacy witnessed to in Genesis 1:2 insofar as it depicts a prefallen world. In short, *tohu vabohu* is rendered evil insofar as it is repressed and projected outward as the disorder of sin, and good insofar as it is welcomed as the potentiality for other creatures who transcend my finite systems of signification.

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, on this reading, makes room for a subtle doctrine of sin that is absent in both Keller and Barth. I contend that as a result neither Keller nor Barth has room for the healing of sin—a state of affairs that, as I will draw out in the conclusion, goes hand in hand with the kind of ambiguity they maintain in their readings of Genesis 1:2.

Keller conspicuously has no doctrine of sin at all. She sets two logics side by side: a violent *ex nihilo* logic in which chaos is opposed to order, and a trinitarian *tehom* logic in which chaos is brought into noncompetitive relation with order as difference. But the former is never named sin, and the transition between one and the other is unspoken for. Elohim is immanent to the creational process—one aspect of its trinitarian logic—and so cannot be called upon, as might a transcendent God, to reinstantiate that logic in the face of its distortion. What Keller lacks, in short, is a logic of redemption. This she might have found in the kind of prophetic vision we encountered in part in Jeremiah and Isaiah above, in which the judgment of sin makes way for salvation. But she would no doubt find in such a God of judgment a mirror of the warrior God of the *Chaoskampf*, whom she reads as the polemical target of Genesis 1.⁵⁵ In my reading, by contrast, judgment invites the confession of sin, which makes way for the reinterpretation and transformation of disordered chaos, and as such is the beginning of the healing of sin.

By contrast with Keller, Barth has a full-bodied doctrine of sin as *das Nichtige*. However, as that which in Christ, and prefiguratively in Genesis 1:2, is rejected, it is never in fact healed. *Tohu vabohu* must simply be excluded as evil; it cannot be reinterpreted, in a confession

⁵⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 117.

of sin as the corruption of the good, as a primordially good chaos. In other words, *tohu vabohu* as sin cannot be healed.⁵⁶

Conclusion

My aim in this article has been to test the hypothesis that Christian doctrine has the role of preserving the ambiguity of scripture, and it has done so by means of the illustrative case study of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as a hermeneutical rule for Genesis 1. How, then, has the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* fared in respect of the ambiguities of Genesis 1:2? Let us expand on the answer that began to emerge in the previous section.

Genesis 1:2 is ambiguous in two key respects (which multiply in further subambiguities). It is unclear, in the first place, whether the state depicted in verse 2 precedes or postdates the divine act of creation signified in verse 1. It is unclear, in the second place, whether the state depicted in verse 2 is good or evil. Closing the first gap in favor of “precedes,” Keller held open the second, maintaining that chaos is *neither* good *nor* evil, but contains the potentiality for both. Barth closed the second gap in favor of evil, thereby holding open the first, maintaining that chaos *neither* predates *nor* postdates the divine act of creation, but is simply excluded by it. My creation *ex nihilo* reading closes the first gap in favor of “postdates,” thereby holding open the second ambiguity, maintaining that chaos is *both* good *and* evil (depending on its reception).

The ambiguities held open by Keller and Barth are different in kind from the one my own interpretation has opened up. Theirs are a neither/nor, an excluded middle, which arguably paralyzes the reader. Keller does not help us see how a threatening chaos can be transformed into a life-giving one. Barth gives us nowhere to stand by premising new life on the exclusion of the old. On my reading, the ambiguity of Genesis 1:2 is a both/and (a space in which the law of noncontradiction does not hold). Specifically, Genesis 1:2 awaits contextual determination for its interpretation. Manifest as the disorder of sin, its chaos must be named evil, but manifest in the good chaos of ourselves and others that transcends the particular orders we have

⁵⁶ The doctrine of sin incipiently developed here has more in keeping with both Augustine and Luther, and would benefit from further development in dialogue with them both, in particular with the accounts of sin to be found in Augustine's *Confessions* and in his anti-Pelagian writings, and in Luther's *Romans Lectures* and in his *Operationes in Psalmos*.

created, it must be welcomed as good. Thus, creation *ex nihilo* as a hermeneutical rule invites attention to contingent, future contexts, as well as to the contemporaneous contexts of other reading communities. It is a generative ambiguity.⁵⁷

In light of this conclusion, we are invited to refine our hypothesis. For Christian doctrine to preserve the generativity of scripture, it is not enough for it merely to hold open its ambiguity—for there are different ways doing so. Doctrine must do so, not in a way that preserves but ultimately stultifies the ambiguity, but in a way that keeps it vitally open for contextual determination.

I began from a set of hermeneutical connections between generativity, ambiguity, and truth. These were justified and unpacked in the context of a hermeneutical model proposed as an alternative to two arguably limited models, one that harnessed the truth of a text to its origins, and one that relativized the truth of a text by dispersing it over a variety of incommensurable contexts. According to my alternative model, by contrast, truth is something that unfolds over time, as the signs of a text come into connection with other signs, revealing different aspects of the one reality “into which” the text signifies. I suggested, finally, that “generative” might be given the stronger sense of “life giving” in the context of a doctrine of creation.

I am now in a position to develop this theological insight into a fully theological rearticulation of my initial hermeneutic. Genesis 1 is life giving insofar as it makes way for the contextual naming and healing of sin. Creation *ex nihilo* identifies the logic of that naming and healing, but does not specify in advance how sin will manifest itself nor (concomitantly) what shape its healing will take. It holds open the generative ambiguity of Genesis 1 by inviting such contextual determination—but precisely by ruling out an acontextual determination of chaos as either good, evil, or neither. It is a logic of attention, in which the presuppositionless God invites attention to be given both to our own provisional conditionedness and conditioning, and at the same time to other creatures as they transcend those conditions, having identities ultimately grounded in God as the creator *ex nihilo*.

In our fallen world, life giving means healing from sin. A text’s truth thus has to do with its redemptive capacity, or alternatively, with

⁵⁷ To read a text in terms of a both/and ambiguity is, in Peter Ochs’s terms, to treat the text as “vague.” Ochs develops Peirce’s logic of vagueness into a hermeneutics of vagueness. See *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011). The hermeneutic developed in this article is deeply indebted to Ochs.

its signification into the one reality God is redeeming. More precisely, it signifies into that reality both by the exposure of the sinful fiction we have made of it, and by recalling the ultimate conditions of its goodness. A generative reading is one that operates with this logic of healing. It might do so in a very specific context, by addressing a contextually specific sin. Or it might, like the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, articulate this logic as a more general hermeneutical rule, making way for contextually specific readings. A nongenerative reading will either address a contextually specific sin in a way that fails to heal it, or it will articulate a logic in conflict with the logic of healing. Either way, nongenerative readings will have a tendency to die out, since they will fail to signify the ultimate reality of God's redemption, contributing instead to the fictional reality of sin that is destined for self-defeat.

There is a potential circularity to this article's argument. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* underpins a hermeneutic of generativity, which in turn leads to the conclusion that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (as generative) is an appropriate hermeneutical rule for the reading of Genesis 1. This does not signal the argument's failure, however. First, the conclusion regarding Genesis 1 can be regarded as the interpretive application of the theoretical hermeneutic. It is an explication rather than a proof. Second, the application involves the introduction of Genesis 1 as data in respect of which the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is both put to the test and given practical outworking. Specifically, the interaction between creation *ex nihilo* and Genesis 1 has enabled a characterization of that one reality, or creation, into which generative signs signify, according to the theoretical hermeneutic. Put differently, Genesis 1 has contributed to a more than formal account of God's creation.

Moreover, generativity and healing are about the long term. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* may so far have stood the test of time, but it may yet be brought in question by gaps in Genesis 1 that have unknowingly been suppressed in the foregoing, or that have not yet come into view. My conclusion is the limited one that creation *ex nihilo* (contra Keller) still has life in it, making way for a viable and relatively generative interpretation of Genesis 1. But its ability to sustain life may and should continue to be contested as it is brought into dialogue with very different interpretive trajectories.

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